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What are Academies the answer to?

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Abstract

This paper builds upon an earlier analysis presented in this journal. Using official figures for school compositions and for outcomes at KS4 from 1997 to 2007, this paper considers each of the annual cohorts of new Academies in England, from 2002 to 2006. It shows that their level of success in comparison to their predecessors, national averages, their changing compositions, and their changing exam entry practices, are insubstantial. Of course some schools are gaining higher scores since Academisation, but others are gaining lower scores. Using the most recent results available there is no clear evidence that Academies produce better results than local authority schools with equivalent intakes. The Academies programme therefore presents an opportunity cost for no apparent gain.

Introduction

A programme of City Academies was announced by the Secretary of State for Education for England in 2000, to complement the Specialist Schools Programme. Schools running at-risk, in special-measures, or with poor examination results had not previously been allowed to become Specialist schools. This meant that the extra initial

and recurrent funding given to Specialist schools exacerbated the existing competitive disadvantages for so-called 'failing schools'. The Academies Programme was meant to change that. Academies were meant to replace schools in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage, with falling intakes and poor results, and which are increasingly spurned by local parents able to find an alternative school for their child. The new schools are independent of local government control, have voluntary or private sector sponsors, are allowed to have a specialist curriculum, and can select 10% of their intake by aptitude. They have received substantial public investment, new buildings, state-of-the-art facilities, and changes in leadership. Have they worked?

The first three Academies opened in 2002, and success for these schools was claimed almost immediately by their sponsors (BBC 2004). On examination, this success was illusory. Happy to accept short-term indicators of success, when these were shown to be false, the advocates of Academies rejected any short-term indicators of failure. Sponsors, the Department for Education and Skills in England (DfES as it was then, Department for Children, Schools and Families or DCSF now), and government ministers began to change their claims of immediate success into demands that we wait until a whole cohort of students had been through the Academy system. The 2007 results were the first for the students who almost all joined their Academies when they were first Academies, as opposed to previous cohorts who had the school(s) change around them. Thus, we are now able to expand considerably on the snapshot of only three schools published in 2005 (Gorard 2005). Using data for all Academies, their Key Stage 4 results (or KS4, the terminal qualification level for pupils aged 15 starting their final year of compulsory school), their composition in terms of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM, an indicator of family poverty), their rates of exclusion (from the pupil level annual schools census, or PLASC, a database of all school pupil characteristics held by DCSF), and the equivalent results for their predecessor schools, this paper asks what, so far, are Academies the answer to?

Academies, originally termed 'City Academies' until the 2002 Education Act, are re-launched or new schools intended to provide improved education for students from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds. Most are re-launched versions of one or two

existing secondary schools, perhaps merged with some primary provision and perhaps with the addition of a sixth form centre where none existed before.

The Academies programme aims to challenge the culture of educational underattainment and to deliver real improvements in standards. All Academies are located in areas of disadvantage... Academies *will* break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation. (DfES 2004a, emphasis added)

The DCSF website and the PLASC (along with the National Pupil Database, or NPD, a database of all school pupil assessment details held by DCSF) has details of a further eight Academies opened in 2003, three in 2004, seven in 2005, and 14 in 2006. There are other more recent Academies and some others named Academies but with no available student achievement data. All are officially classified as 'independent' schools, because they are so far independent of local education authority (LEA) control, and funded directly by the DCSF and with external sponsors from both the private and voluntary sectors. Perhaps the closest types of pre-existing institutions, in organisational terms, were the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), and indeed there is some overlap between these categories but the major difference is that CTCs were not built on 'failing' schools but usually high-performing ones. They are similar in setup but not in purpose or results. Academies also share the notion of curriculum specialisms with the specialist schools programme. Like them, Academies are able to select a minority of their intake by aptitude. According to the government, the intention is that the Academies will raise standards by innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum.

We expect that all Academies will make steady upward progress... Good teaching, excellent facilities and motivated pupils *will* deliver real improvements in educational standards. (DfES 2004b)

Are Academies a solution to the perennial problem for school improvers? Do they deliver superior educational outcomes without changing the nature of their student intake? Which ones have improved their results other than in a trend from before they

were Academies, and which of these has done so without a substantial change in FSM intake? Were the right schools selected in each area in the first place?

Data and methods

The results in this paper come from three compatible and very useful sources. These are the DCSF standards website listing aggregate examination results for each school over a number of years (up to 2007 at time of writing), the annual schools census (ASC) listing the aggregate intake to schools each year (including the number of students eligible for FSM), and the PLASC/NPD which provides the anonymous characteristics and examination results for each student in each school. The analysis here was conducted in 2007 using DCSF and ASC figures up to 2007, and PLASC/NPD figures up to 2006. Only simple descriptions and comparisons are used, along with a correlation computed between the school-level values for KS4 results and eligibility for free school meals (FSM).

Overall picture

The Academies that were open in 2005/06 took a considerably higher proportion (36%) of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) than the remaining educational institutions in England (13%). This is not surprising, given that they were to have been selected as some of the most challenged schools in the most deprived areas. It also goes some way towards explaining the generally lower level of raw-score results in Academies for students aged 15/16. Over the period covered in this paper, national school-level results at KS4 and the percentage of students eligible for FSM correlated at around -0.5 (Pearson's R). Schools with more FSM students tended to have a considerably lower percentage of students reaching level 2 at KS4 (five good GCSEs at grade A* to C, or equivalent, often needed for entry to sixth form).

Students in the open Academies generally entered fewer full GCSEs than in the other institutions (the General Certificate of Secondary Education is at time of writing the most prevalent qualification taken at KS4), although their GCSE equivalent entry

(including other qualifications deemed by DCSF to be at the same level as GCSE) was identical (Table 1). This is largely because Academies are more likely to enter their students for dual (and higher) award subjects and qualifications, and other recent alternatives to single full GCSEs. Fewer students in Academies reach level 1 (any GCSE or equivalent) and markedly fewer reach level 2. The achievement gap between Academies and other schools in the proportion reaching level 2, including English and maths, is around 20% (the difference between the two scores, divided by their sum, see Gorard 2006).

Table 1 – Selected examination results, all schools in England, 2005/06

	Non Academies	Academies
Percentage gaining Level 2	58	46
Percentage gaining Level 2 with functional English and Maths	46	31
Percentage gaining Level 1	89	81
Mean full GCSE entries per student	7.6	6.3
Mean GCSE A*-C per student	4.8	2.9
GCSE equivalent entries	9.5	9.5

Source: PLASC/NPD KS4 2005/06

It is not fair to compare Academies with all other institutions in terms of results because of their markedly different intakes (Gorard 2000). Traditional value-added analyses do not do justice to the real difference in intakes between schools (Gorard 2008a). So, a simple way of looking at and judging the performance of Academies in relation to their stated aims is over time, and especially in comparison to the schools they replaced.

School-level analysis

The first three Academies opening in 2002 did not outperform the schools that they replaced, despite the annual national increase in GCSE scores across the board

(Gorard 2005). In general, by 2004 they had reduced their FSM intake, increased their rate of exclusion, and had declining scores in GCSE terms. What they have all done, both in absolute terms and relative to their surrounding schools, is to substantially reduce the percentage of students eligible for FSM since becoming Academies (Table 2). Given the objectives of the programme, this was and is success of a kind in stemming the apparent spiral of decline. All still have high levels of student poverty, but they are now closer to their local authority average. However, given the strong correlation between deprivation of intakes and examination outcomes, this success in changing the intake means that we would expect, *ceteris paribus*, examination outcomes to rise irrespective of anything that the Academies have done in addition. This is what we find.

Table 2 - FSM percentages for 2002 cohort of Academies 1997-2007

	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Business	<i>53</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>46</i>	42	37	38	39	39
Greig	<i>48</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>39</i>	43	47	44	38	39
Unity	<i>60</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>47</i>	49	50	49	44	45

Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies.

By 2007 (see Table 3) the Business Academy had an even lower level 2 percentage (31% of students) than in 2004 (34%). Not surprisingly, this was associated with a slight increase in FSM, from 37% in 2004 to 39% in 2007 (Table 2). The other two 2002 Academies had considerable increases in level 2 results - Unity from 17% to 45% and Greig City from 26% to 65%. Again, this is associated negatively with a shift in FSM, from 50% to 45% for Unity and 47% to 39% for Greig City.

Table 3 - Level 2 percentages for 2002 cohort of Academies 1997-2007

	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Business	<i>13</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>17</i>	-	21	34	29	32	31
Greig	<i>14</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>30</i>	-	35	26	54	59	65
Unity	<i>13</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>17</i>	-	16	17	16	34	45

Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies. Results are not publicly available for the first year of each Academy.

Nevertheless, the gains at level 2 are impressive until we look at level 2 including English and maths, the new DCSF standard threshold. Here there is no clear gain for either school (Greig City has 19% in 2003 and 21% in 2007, for example, while Unity declines from 14% in 2006 to 12% in 2007). This suggests that the shift in the more general level 2 figures, above and beyond what might be expected by the reduction in FSM, is due to changes in exam entry policy (see above). On this measure, the Business Academy is doing somewhat better than its two peers (with 27% gaining level 2 including English and Maths in 2006). The picture is confusing, because the exams have changed, their prevalence in the wider population has changed substantially since 1997, school intakes change and so on. Perhaps the later Academies can make the situation clearer.

Table 4 - Level 2 percentages, including English and Maths, for 2002 cohort of Academies 2003-2007

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Business	15	13	15	27	19
Greig	19	10	10	15	21
Unity	7	7	6	14	12

Of those eight schools becoming Academies in 2003, the figures for the Walsall Academy in 2007 are not available. The school has not shown a clear improvement since becoming an Academy in the previous years moving from 50% in 2003 to 57% in 2006 (only 24% with English and Maths), while its FSM intake has decreased sharply every year from 26% in 2003 to 11% in 2007 (Table 5). Thus, any changes in its level 2 scores over time are easily explicable in terms of changes in student intake. There is no great improvement to be attributed to the other changes associated with Academisation. Other than Walsall, the 2003 cohort of Academies are all clearly schools with highly deprived intakes, with the Academy at Peckham taking nearly two thirds of its students from families living in poverty. In terms of the original aims of the Academy Programme these look like the right kinds of schools (which cannot be said for all subsequent cohorts).

Table 5 - FSM percentages for 2003 cohort of Academies 2004-2007

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Walsall	26	16	14	11
Manchester	51	62	61	50
Academy at Peckham	60	65	64	53
Capital City	39	34	34	35
City Academy	36	37	46	45
Kings	38	32	30	25
West London	41	42	43	41
Djanogly City	35	36	29	38

Of the Academies other than Walsall, Manchester and Peckham have, like two of the 2002 Academies, a recent run of increases at level 2 (Table 6). Unlike them, these increases (while lower) also occur when English and maths are included, suggesting that exam entry policy has not changed that much and so does not account for most of the increase in scores (Table 7). But like the 2002 Academies, FSM has also fallen – from 62% in 2005 to 50% in 2007 for Manchester and from 65% in 2005 to 53% in 2007 for Peckham. Thus, the combination of parallel increases in level 2 scores nationally, some changes in exam entries, and substantial decreases in FSM students are sufficient to explain rises in level 2 scores here. Again there is no need to search for further factors such as leadership, building or independence from local authority control. Most of the other 2003 Academies show no clear improvement. Indeed, City and West London both had lower level 2 scores in 2007 than 2006, while Capital City had a lower level 2 score in 2005 than its predecessor school had in 2000, three years before Academisation. In addition, some of these schools experienced substantial reductions in FSM that might have been expected to show up in higher level 2 scores. Kings, for example, moved from 38% in 2004 to 25% in 2007.

Table 6 – Level 2 percentages for 2003 cohort of Academies 2000-2007

	2000	2001	2002		2004	2005	2006	2007
Walsall	12	13	22	-	50	67	57	-
Manchester	8	14	12	-	8	25	28	33
Academy at Peckham	21	21	22	-	12	22	30	38
Capital City	23	13	14	-	29	17	29	48

City Academy	<i>17</i>	22	25	-	33	52	50	48
Kings	<i>20</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>21</i>	-	34	43	35	47
West London	<i>17</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>13</i>	-	35	28	47	37
Djanogly City	<i>44</i>	52	55	-	51	57	56	67

Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies. Results are not publicly available for the first year of each Academy.

Table 7 – Level 2 percentages, including English and Maths, for 2003 cohort of Academies 2003-2007

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Walsall	5	21	24	-
Manchester	6	12	22	20
Academy at Peckham	10	18	23	24
Capital City	17	11	17	22
City Academy	16	19	18	21
Kings	26	23	23	34
West London	8	11	25	24
Djanogly City	19	18	25	35

Taken as a whole, the 2003 Academies do not portray the ‘steady upward’ progress proposed by the DfES in 2004 (see above). Djanogly is the only Academy here to have a higher level 2 score in 2007 than previous years, a growth in level 2 including English and Maths, *and* no reduction in FSM intake. And even Djanogly had years before Academisation with higher FSM but still high level 2 scores - the percentage in 2002 when the predecessor school was closed was the same as the Academy achieved in 2006. As yet, there is no clear evidence that Academies perform any better than their predecessor schools once changes in national level 2, FSM and exam entry policy are accounted for.

There were only three new Academies in 2004, of which one (Northampton) had markedly lower levels of deprivation suggesting that it might not have been the most deserving local choice for the investment (Table 8). Northampton (like Walsall before it, and others including Harefield, Trinity, Salford and Landau Forte after it) has a

lower than national average FSM intake, and so should probably not have been considered for the Programme in the first place. All three Academies show a slight drop in FSM intake since 2005.

Table 8 - FSM percentages for 2004 cohort of Academies 2005-2007

	2005	2006	2007
Stockley	44	44	40
Northampton	19	18	16
London Academy	43	44	41

Of the 2004 cohort, the London Academy has not made much improvement in the general level 2 indicator (Table 9) but has moved from 24% with English and Maths in 2005 to 39% in 2007 (Table 10), while mostly retaining its FSM intake. Northampton's level 2 score for 2007 is no better than for 2005, and not much better than in 2002 despite a decline in FSM from 20% in 2004. Stockley has made some gains at level 2 on both indicators, with a small drop in FSM (44% 2005 to 40% 2007). In general, and over a short haul, the small 2004 cohort appears to have done rather better than previous cohorts. However, there are only two that should be Academies and too much should not be read into this pattern. If both the level 2 indicator and FSM level were actually random and each school could go up or down annually, then one in four schools would have an increase in level 2 without a decrease in FSM every year. One or two Academies out of 14 with one or two years of success does not therefore suggest any kind of positive pattern for the programme as a whole.

Table 9 – Level 2 percentages for 2004 cohort of Academies 2000-2007

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Stockley	<i>21</i>	<i>17</i>	8	<i>14</i>	-	19	31	44
Northampton	<i>19</i>	<i>21</i>	29	<i>19</i>	-	34	40	33
London Academy	<i>24</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>40</i>	-	48	48	55

Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies. Results are not publicly available for the first year of each Academy.

Table 10 – Level 2 percentages, including English and maths, for 2004 cohort of Academies 2005-2007

	2005	2006	2007
Stockley	9	16	25
Northampton	18	24	22
London Academy	24	31	39

Of the 2005 cohort, Salford, like Northampton above, does not really fit the profile of Academies as originally envisaged. It was scoring getting 44% at level 2 when it was still Canon Williamson School in 2004, with a relatively low FSM score of 29% (Table 11). Despite this, it has further reduced its FSM intake to 18% in 2007 meaning that other local schools that were more worthy of Academisation initially now have to take an even larger share of students from families living in poverty. Harefield, with 16% FSM in 2007, and Trinity, with 15% FSM in 2007, are similar to Salford in these two respects. They were not the right schools to become Academies in their areas (according to the programme aims) and their further decrease in FSM intake since Academisation has led to other local schools increasing their FSM intake further. Rather than reducing segregation by poverty these Academies have worsened it.

Table 11 – FSM percentages for 2005 cohort of Academies 2005-2007

	2005	2006	2007
The Marlowe Academy	36	35	29
Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy	54	45	44
The Harefield Academy	21	20	16
Trinity Academy	21	22	15
The Academy of St Francis of Assisi	55	47	47
Salford City Academy	30	29	18
St Pauls Academy	-	25	26

If we leave these three aside the picture for the remainder of the 2005 cohort is again mixed (Table 12). Marlowe has increased its score at level 2, but decreased its FSM intake from 54% to 44% over the two years available, and only manages to get around

5% of students to level 2 with English and maths suggesting that its new level 2 scores are not really comparable with those before 2005.

Table 12 – Level 2 percentages for 2005 cohort of Academies 2001-2007

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
The Marlowe Academy	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>15</i>	-	27	37
Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy	<i>9</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>15</i>	-	29	42
The Harefield Academy	<i>23</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>22</i>	-	31	38
Trinity Academy	<i>33</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>21</i>	-	34	64
The Academy of St Francis of Assisi	<i>15</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>22</i>	-	40	43
Salford City Academy	<i>22</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>44</i>	-	50	62
St Pauls Academy	<i>52</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>54</i>	-	59	82

Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies. Results are not publicly available for the first year of each Academy.

Haberdashers is similar (but with slightly better English and maths). St Francis has shown some progress on the overall level 2 indicator since Academisation, while changing from 55% to 47% FSM and showing no progress at all on the level 2 indicator including English and maths (Table 13). St Pauls has one impressive year in 2007 (the figures for 2006 are not substantially better than its predecessor). It will be interesting to see what happens to this 82% figure, achieved without decline in FSM and echoed in English and maths. It is perhaps notable that an FSM intake of 25%, while marginally higher than the national average, puts St Pauls in a very different position to many Academies struggling on 40-60% FSM intake. So again, the evidence is far from conclusive but gives no indication that the programme as a whole is being effective in its own terms.

Table 13 – Level 2 percentages, including English and Maths, for 2005 cohort of Academies 2006-2007

	2006	2007
The Marlowe Academy	5	7

Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy	14	20
The Harefield Academy	31	35
Trinity Academy	19	40
The Academy of St Francis of Assisi	16	16
Salford City Academy	27	41
St Pauls Academy	39	51

The most recent cohort of Academies, at time of writing, to have available results was created/converted in 2006 (Table 14). Landau Forte is a rebadged CTC with high scores and low FSM, making little upward progress over time, and which does not fit the profile of an Academy as originally envisaged.

Table 14 – FSM percentages for 2006 cohort of Academies 2005-2007

	2005	2006	2007
David Young Community Academy	<i>44&39</i>	<i>49&42</i>	42
The Barnsley Academy	<i>50</i>	<i>53</i>	37
John Madejski Academy	<i>35</i>	<i>31</i>	29
Sheffield Park Academy	<i>41</i>	<i>40</i>	36
North Liverpool Academy	<i>59&39</i>	<i>61&38</i>	39
Sheffield Springs Academy	<i>32</i>	<i>35</i>	35
Harris Academy Merton	<i>22</i>	<i>24</i>	30
Burlington Danes Academy	<i>37</i>	<i>37</i>	21
Westminster Academy	<i>45</i>	<i>41</i>	41
Harris Academy Bermondsey	<i>66</i>	<i>63</i>	61
Grace Academy	<i>27</i>	<i>29</i>	28
St Marks Church of England Academy	<i>27</i>	<i>27</i>	27
The Gateway Academy	<i>31</i>	<i>35</i>	36
Landau Forte College	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	10

Note: David Young and North Liverpool Academies had two predecessor schools. Their FSM intake after becoming Academies is clearly lower than the weighted average of their predecessors.

On the first, and only, set of level 2 figures we have so far, Westminster is doing worse than the school it replaced despite a drop in FSM intake from 45% in 2005 to 41% in 2007 (Table 15). North Liverpool, Grace and St Marks are not clearly doing any better than the schools they replaced to become Academies. In 2003, 25% of student at the St Marks predecessor attained level 2, and in 2007 after a general increase in GCSE scores and the money and impact of an Academy and an intake remaining at 27% FSM, 25% of St Marks students again attained level 2. In 2007, after a huge decrease in FSM intake from the two predecessor schools, North Liverpool attained 37% at level 2 but had already attained an average score of 35% in 2004 long before becoming an Academy, and when one of the predecessors had a staggering 61% FSM intake. Grace has gone from 30% at level 2 in 2002 when not an Academy to 33% in 2007 after a larger rise in average national scores. So these five Academies are, if anything, evidence of the failure (over this very short time period) of the Academies programme.

Table 15 – Level 2 percentages for 2006 cohort of Academies 2002-2007

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
David Young Community Academy	9	12	12	16	-	41
The Barnsley Academy	11	9	29	43	-	61
John Madejski Academy	15	12	15	10	-	26
Sheffield Park Academy	22	20	27	28	-	39
North Liverpool Academy	23	28	35	17	-	37
Sheffield Springs Academy	24	19	25	19	-	31
Harris Academy Merton	25	19	21	31	-	40
Burlington Danes Academy	26	32	28	34	-	44
Westminster Academy	27	26	27	27	-	23
Harris Academy Bermondsey	30	27	33	41	-	58
Grace Academy	30	22	16	22	-	33
St Marks Church of England Academy		25	18	19	-	25
The Gateway Academy			13	12	-	41

Landau Forte College	<i>71</i>	82	<i>80</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>86</i>	
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Note: the figures in italics are from before the Academies. Results are not publicly available for the first year of each Academy.

John Madejski has a clearly higher level 2 score in 2007 than in any previous year for which data is available, but only managed 5% of students with level 2 including English and maths, despite a decrease in FSM from 35% to 29% (Table 16).

Table 16 – Level 2 percentages for 2006 cohort of Academies, 2007

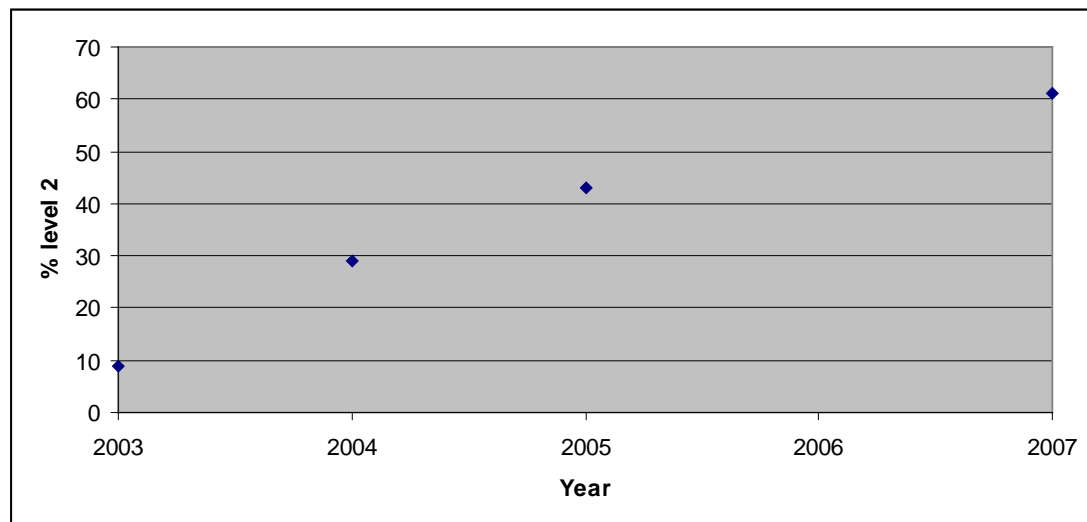
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
David Young Community Academy					21
The Barnsley Academy					20
John Madejski Academy					5
Sheffield Park Academy					19
North Liverpool Academy					28
Sheffield Springs Academy					20
Harris Academy Merton					28
Burlington Danes Academy					35
Westminster Academy					17
Harris Academy Bermondsey					32
Grace Academy					19
St Marks Church of England Academy					20
The Gateway Academy					12
Landau Forte College	<i>61</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>63</i>	-

Note: the prior scores for Landau Forte are included here as they are available, and to illustrate the point that this was not a school under any threat before becoming an Academy.

The picture for the other Academies is more mixed. David Young, Sheffield Park, Burlington Danes, and Harris Merton portray an increase at level 2 (both indicators) but an equivalent drop in FSM over the same period. Barnsley shows a similar increase from a higher base, but with a huge drop in FSM from 53% in 2006 to 37% in 2007. This is an amazing change in intake over one year, and it would be

interesting to find out how this occurred. In addition, the growth in level 2 at Barnsley obviously predates Academisation, and Figure 1 actually shows that the gradient of improvement declines somewhat after 2005. In this situation, we cannot attribute the 2007 improvement to the Academies programme.

Figure 1 – Percentage of students attaining level 2 KS4 2003-2007, Barnsley Academy



Sheffield Springs, Harris Bermondsey and Gateway retain or even increase their share of FSM students and yet show an increase in the general level 2 indicator for one year. But as before three schools out of 14, or indeed four or five schools in total out of 35 Academies, with a year or two of good scores is not sufficient to argue that Academies as a whole have been differentially effective.

Discussion

This sceptical consideration of the advances made by schools converted to Academies between 2002 and 2006 is necessary. Claims to success of the programme must be able to survive such a consideration if it is to be continued ethically in terms of its public funding and especially in terms of the potential opportunity costs for students facing their one chance of education. The claims to success of the programme by DfES as early as 2004 were based partly on the misleading comparison with the prior

results of the very different CTCs (DfES 2005). These claims to success were repeated in the Associated Academy Portfolios sent in a pack to potential sponsors by Christine Horner, Office of the Schools Commissioner, DfES (12th October 2006) following a meeting between Adonis and potential sponsors, and by DfES (2005, p.2):

In 2003, their first year, the average 5+ A*-C results in the three open Academies was 24%, compared to an average of 16% in their predecessor schools in the previous year.

As table 2 shows neither of these figures is correct, and one Academy actually had lower results in 2003 than its predecessor.

Of the 24 or so Academies discussed above, only around five appear to be gaining appreciably higher results for their students than in previous years (including those when not an Academy). Is this enough to declare the Academies Programme a success? Not really. None of the five is in the earliest cohort. The earliest example is, as explained, no more than would be expected by chance and the later examples have very few years of data to examine. The response by Adonis and others to Gorard (2005) was that one or two years of data is not enough (despite their prior recorded claims of success for the Programme). If a couple of years data were not enough in 2005 then they are not enough for the 2005 and 2006 cohorts now. However, the picture is mixed and a few schools do appear to be bucking the usual pattern by gaining higher scores with the same intake (as assessed by FSM at least) and without sacrificing English and maths. If we note these schools now and see that this form can be reproduced annually then this would be much more impressive than simple *post hoc* identification via dredging. In summary, there is no clear evidence here that Academies work to produce better results than the kinds of schools they replaced but neither is the evidence as clear as in 2005 that they are completely failing to do so.

It is a concern that with the expansion of the Programme an increasing proportion of the 'wrong' schools are being selected to receive the money and attention involved. Walsall Academy has only around 11% FSM intake, for example, and in 2005 nearly 70% of students got to level 2. If this is a school in urgent need of government intervention then nearly all schools in England are in the same position. This situation

is likely to worsen with private schools and universities entering the fold as sponsors (Hatcher 2006).

Having completed in-depth field work in a number of Academies since 2004, I wish to repeat my point from Gorard (2005). I have considerable sympathy with the aims of the Programme and admiration for those who work in the really challenging Academies in England. However, it is not immediately clear that they are doing a better job overall than their colleagues in non-Academy schools in similar circumstances, for whom I have similar admiration. To say that struggling Academies are doing no better than their non-Academy peers is not to denigrate them. But it does suggest that the programme is a waste of time, effort and energy at least in terms of this rather narrow measure of KS4 outcomes. There is some evidence that despite the independence conferred on Academies one of the ways in which some improve is by becoming more like non-Academy schools again. For example, one of the first received considerable publicity for being open plan without front walls or doors in classrooms above ground floor, and for having no outside play area or grounds, for example. This Academy has learnt that open plan classrooms are too noisy and so has built internal walls, and that students require somewhere to play outside and so has created a traditional playground. Prior schools were built like that for a purpose. This is a common finding. As a consequence of their ongoing government-funded evaluation academies, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2006, pp29-30) note:

There was also interesting evidence from the evaluation to suggest that some Academies were beginning to pull back on some of the more innovative approaches that had been implemented in the first year.

Perhaps such experimentation should not concern us, given that the independence of Academies may yet lead to one or more of them showing us convincingly how to break the link between intakes and outcomes. On the other hand, there are opportunity costs. The students passing through the school while it experiments have only that one shot at initial education. The money involved could have been used differently – spent on refurbishing the most deprived schools or used to follow the most deprived students to whichever school they attend. Perhaps the biggest threat, however, comes from the very diversity of Academies (Gorard 2008b). It is becoming clearer from

national and international studies that comprehensive systems of schooling not only reduce the SES gaps in attainment but also tend to lead to higher scores overall (Gorard et al. 2003, EGREES 2008). Quality and equality are not in tension, and so a lessening of equity is not a price we have to pay for higher attainment (Gorard 2007a, 2007b). While Academies were selected as the most challenged this was not a big issue, because their clear purpose was to lead to greater equity. As the Academy Programme moves away from its initial parameters, as it is clearly already doing with some of the examples discussed in this paper and the recent conversion of private schools in Academies, their potential for increasing inequity for no gain in attainment will concern us more and more.

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